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ABSTRACT

Multidimensional scaling of the decision patterns of 20 university boards of trustees placed them on two dimensions that differentiated among boards showing the following general patterns: (1) decisions concentrated on highly specific personnel matters; (2) decisions spanning a range of policy levels, from those setting broad policy through management decisions establishing administrative practices to highly specific administrative decisions, but concentrated on matters concerned with the physical plant and business and finance; and (3) decisions spanning all levels of policy and concerned with a wide range of topics other than the ones that typically absorb the attention of boards of trustees. (Author)

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Types of University Governing Boards

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The duties of governing boards of colleges and universities have been studied and analyzed fairly extensively, but the ways they carry out those roles, their decision-making processes, have been less frequently observed. Among the duties carried out by governing boards are monitoring the management of the institution to maintain public accountability, acting as both an interpreter and buffer between the institution and its public constituencies, and setting the basic purposes of the institution and seeing that the means for their accomplishment are provided (Harvey, 1971). The breadth of these responsibilities and the brief time during which boards meet leads to the frequently expressed view that the proper function of boards is to deal only with basic policy matters while delegating authority for the operation of the institution to the administration. Excessive concern with administrative detail has been called a major abuse of the trustees' authority (Heilbron, 1970), yet few if any studies have been made of the decision-making processes of boards of trustees.

To conduct such a study, the minutes of more than 100 meetings of 20 boards of trustees during the 1971-72 academic year were read. The 20 governing boards all represented public institutions or systems but varied widely in other respects such as the number of institutions controlled and method of appointment to the board. Each action taken by a board was coded with respect to the area of the decision (e.g., business/finance, personnel, educational programs) and the policy level of the decision. Policy level

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was coded into three categories developed from a distinction proposed by Simon (1956). Decisions at the highest policy level are legislative, establishing broad policies for the institution. At the second level they are managerial, concerned with the interpretation of policy and the setting of limits to delegated authority. At the third level they are administrative, concerned with specific application or implementation of policy. Actions at this third level would be considered by many to be inappropriate for governing boards and more properly the concern of administrators.

Although the boards varied widely in the total number of actions taken, 95 per cent of the actions of all boards were concerned with one of nine major categories. Every decision of every board was therefore coded into one of the nine content categories plus a residual category for the remaining 5 per cent and into the three policy levels. A residual category for the policy levels was required for 14 per cent of the decisions—those concerned with ceremonial actions such as the award of honorary degrees, the acknowledgment of reports, and other actions without policy implications. More than 4,000 actions were coded into the nine content areas, the three policy levels, and the two residual categories.

The number of decisions as revealed in the minutes varied widely across the 20 boards but averaged about 200 decisions per board. On the assumption that in the course of a year different boards will engage in roughly the same amount of business, the numbers of decisions in each category were adjusted to give a total of 200 decisions for each board. This adjustment to relative frequencies seemed more realistic than the alternative assumption that entries in the minutes of different agencies would be equally detailed and that the most active board would make more than 200 times as many decisions as the least active board.

The nature of the decision-making behavior of the 20 boards was defined by the pattern of decisions with respect to policy level and content area. The differences among the 20 decision-making patterns were treated as distances among 20 points in a multidimensional space. Nonmetric multidimensional scaling of the 20 points (Young, 1973) produced a two-dimensional solution that accommodated the distances among the 20 boards with little distortion. These two dimensions are sufficient to describe the characteristic differences in the decision-making patterns of the 20 boards. The two dimensions can be described in terms of idealized or prototype boards whose decision patterns are shown in Table 1. Idealized Boards A and B are polar opposites with respect to the first dimension and Idealized Boards C and D with respect to the second dimension. None of these idealized boards shows a decision pattern identical to that of a real board although at least one real board does lie close to each idealized board in the two-dimensional space the four idealized boards define.

Idealized Board A, at one extreme of the first dimension, applies half its actions to issues concerned with educational programs, with almost all these decisions about evenly split between levels I and II in terms of breadth of policy. Only 2 per cent of their decisions are at policy level III. Board A makes an unusually large number of decisions at policy level I--more than 30 per cent compared with an average for all 20 boards of fewer than 10 per cent. Thirteen per cent of their decisions are concerned with issues of business and finance at policy level II. Another 10 per cent are indeterminate with respect to policy level and concerned with issues that cannot be classified into one of the seven most common areas of content. The dominant

characteristics of this type of board, therefore, are first, a heavy commitment to issues concerning educational programs and second, the exercise of decisions at broad policy levels--decisions that are either legislative or managerial rather than administrative in character.

The contrasting idealized board at the other end of the first dimension, Idealized Board B, exercises well over half its decisions at policy level III--specific administrative decisions. Half of these deal with personnel matters. Most of the rest of the level III decisions are in the areas of business/finance and physical plant. Only an occasional decision has policy implications broad enough to be classed as a level I decision. The level II decisions, slightly more than a third of the total, are concerned primarily with the physical plant and educational programs. Of the business/finance decisions, which constitute about 20 per cent of the total, almost three out of four are at policy level III. The characteristic actions of this type of board are therefore primarily administrative personnel decisions and secondarily administrative business and finance decisions and management decisions concerning the physical plant.

Idealized Board C, which defines one end of the second dimension, is similar to Idealized Board B in making a dominant portion of its decisions at policy level III concerning personnel matters. It differs in making relatively few decisions in the physical plant area and in making a large number of decisions that are unclassifiable with respect to either policy level or area. It can be characterized, therefore, as a board that makes many specific personnel decisions and scatters its other actions over a wide range of areas.

The board that defines the other end of the second dimension, Idealized Board D, exercises most of its authority at the managerial policy level, 60 per cent of its decisions being classified at that level. Almost half of these level II decisions concern the physical plant, and another third of them deal with business and finance. A moderate number of decisions involve administrative actions in the physical plant area. It makes few personnel decisions and little more than half as many level III decisions as does its opposite, Idealized Board C. Few decisions are unclassifiable with respect to policy level. This board can be described as a managerial board concerned primarily with the physical plant and secondarily with questions of business and finance. It deals relatively rarely with personnel matters and usually at the managerial rather than administrative level.

The decision patterns of all 20 boards can be described quite well by locating them on these two dimensions. Twelve of the 20 boards cluster roughly in the quadrant defined by Idealized Boards B and C, as is apparent in Figure 1. A modal board that typified all 20 boards would therefore have characteristics similar to Idealized Boards B and C. The other eight boards scatter broadly across the other three quadrants of the two-dimensional space. Boards similar to either A or D of the idealized boards are relatively rare among the 20 boards examined here, but do exist.

All three policy levels are important in describing the 20 boards, but most of the distinctions among them are involved with levels II and III in the areas of physical plant and business/finance and with level III in the personnel area. Actions at policy level I, the legislative type of decision, and decisions concerned with educational programs are both relatively rare,

but they combine to discriminate rather sharply among the 20 boards. The proportion of a board's business devoted to broad policy decisions about educational programs and the proportion given to administrative personnel decisions are two of the most salient characteristics of university boards of trustees. If the view is accepted that boards should limit their actions to setting policy, delegating detailed administrative concerns to the university's administrators, idealized boards A and D would be the preferred types, one primarily concerned with educational programs and the other with managerial issues in the areas of physical plant and business/finance. But these are the boards that fall in the sparsely occupied regions of the two-dimensional space. The decision-making practices of university governing boards does not coincide closely with what is considered theoretically proper.

Table 1

Decision Patterns of Four Idealized Boards

(Cell entries are percentages of the total number of decisions)

IDEALIZED BOARD A (Dimension 1)

Area	Policy Level				
	I	II	III	Indeterminate	Total
Personnel	1	4	0	0	5
Student Affairs	0	0	0	0	0
Business/Finance	2	13	1	1	17
Physical Plant	2	8	0	0	10
Internal Board Affairs	0	0	0	3	3
Educational Programs	25	23	1	1	50
Other	3	2	0	10	15
Total	33	50	2	15	100

IDEALIZED BOARD B (Dimension 1)

Area	Policy Level				
	I	II	III	Indeterminate	Total
Personnel	0	2	30	0	32
Student Affairs	0	1	1	0	2
Business/Finance	0	5	15	2	22
Physical Plant	1	16	10	0	27
Internal Board Affairs	0	0	0	1	1
Educational Programs	0	10	3	0	13
Other	0	2	1	0	3
Total	1	36	60	3	100

Table 1 (Cont'd.)

IDEALIZED BOARD C (Dimension 2)

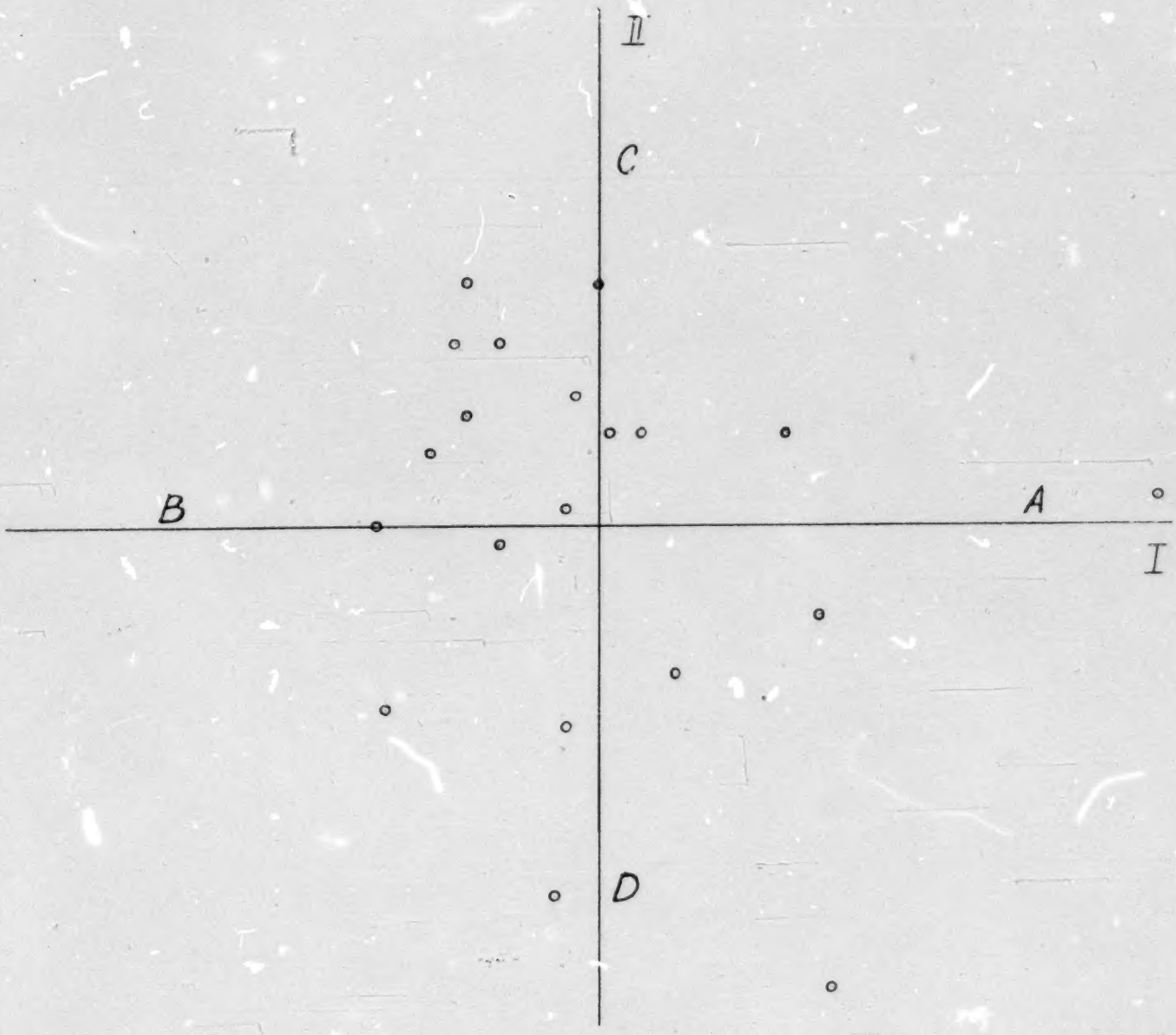
Area	Policy Level				
	I	II	III	Indeterminate	Total
Personnel	1	1	26	2	30
Student Affairs	0	0	0	1	1
Business/Finance	1	6	8	0	15
Physical Plant	0	8	1	0	9
Internal Board Affairs	1	1	0	7	9
Educational Programs	1	2	6	0	9
Other	2	6	6	13	27
Total	6	24	47	23	100

IDEALIZED BOARD D (Dimension 2)

Area	Policy Level				
	I	II	III	Indeterminate	Total
Personnel	0	6	3	0	9
Student Affairs	2	0	0	0	2
Business/Finance	2	18	7	0	27
Physical Plant	0	27	14	0	41
Internal Board Affairs	3	2	0	0	5
Educational Programs	2	0	0	0	2
Other	2	7	2	3	14
Total	11	60	26	3	100

Figure 1

Locations of 20 Governing
Boards on Two-Dimensions



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